

Etiquette Education for the Goal of Marriage: White, Heterosexual, Feminine Success and the Narrative Formula of Hollywood Romantic Comedies

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Abstract

Many Hollywood romantic comedy films feature a scene of a woman being trained in social etiquette practices. Social etiquette education for women is seen as the end goal of serving their male counterpart (Simonian, 2010). More recently, this trope can be seen in romantic comedies featuring non-white male protagonists. This paper asks how this message promotes normative gender and racial ideologies through media representation in the top-grossing Hollywood romantic comedies? The purpose of this work is to map out the path of protagonists in romantic comedy films seeking social mobility and the identity shift that occurs because of their social etiquette education. This research took a critical feminist lens to analyze three films where thematic categories related to social etiquette emerged around clothing, food, and greetings. Problematic messages around gender binary understandings of gender roles, heteronormativity, stereotypes, rape culture, and whiteness stood out. **Keywords:** *Romantic comedies, critical discourse analysis, social etiquette, feminism, media depictions*

What fork should I use? Should I hug or shake their hand, or bow? Should my dress hem be at the knee or to the floor?

Many questions arise when individuals enter new social contexts. They may meet co-workers at a new job, go out to a fine dining establishment with a new group of friends, or attend a gala for a non-profit group in which they are a part. Not knowing what is expected in a new situation can cause individuals anxiety or discomfort. These contexts are also reflected in many Hollywood films (e.g., *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Get Out*, *Titanic*, *Miss Congeniality*, *The Butler*, *Maid in Manhattan*, etc.) where characters need to learn about the etiquette standards that exist in each setting. Tuckerman and Dannan (1995) define etiquette as, “a ‘ticket’ or ‘card,’ and refers to the ancient custom of a monarch setting forth ceremonial rules and regulations to be observed by members of his court” (p. xi). Instead of monarchs setting rules of etiquette, these rules are rooted in history and reinforced through social norms.

Etiquette experts such as Emily Post write and record etiquette literature, but most social etiquette traditions are passed down from people in dominant groups. As individuals aim to abide by social etiquette norms, they sometimes look to film representations to prepare them for situations they might confront (Maltravers, 2014). It is important, then, for filmmakers to understand the message they are portraying about the goals of etiquette education. Once more, they need to critically consider the messages around both race and gender in these films.

To understand how Hollywood films are portraying social etiquette education in films that target girls and women, three Hollywood romantic comedy films are explored. The 1990 film *Pretty Woman* which, according to statista.com, is still the top grossing “Rom-Com” (i.e., romantic comedy) as of March 2020 grossing over \$463.3 million (Roper, 2020). Thirty years after the release of this film targeting women and girls, it continues to reach global audiences. To consider the effect of whiteness on Rom-Coms, we also analyze the 2005 film *Hitch* that, while the protagonist is a Black male, speaks to how etiquette education is used toward a male’s goal for marriage. *Hitch* is sixth on the list for top-grossing Rom-Coms grossing 368.1 million. Finally, we consider the 2018 film *Crazy Rich Asians* that grossed 238.5 million and includes a female protagonist who finds herself needing to consider the etiquette of a foreign culture. In the end, we argue that the ideologies of these three films perpetuate the narrative of proper social etiquette as a path to social success.

History of Social Etiquette Education

Dominant Discourse of Marginalized Groups and Social Etiquette Education

Throughout history, there have been significant steps and social revolutions for women and people of color to have access to formal education in institutions. In a patriarchal system, education is a tool of empowerment. Social etiquette education was one of the first educational opportunities deemed appropriate for women because it positioned them as attractive for marriage and for fulfilling their social roles as wives and mothers. In the 19th century, boarding schools for young ladies called finishing schools were formed in Western upper-class culture. These institutions, found mostly in Switzerland, were charged with educating young women on etiquette and charm for the goal of finding husbands (Simonian, 2010). Although the formalized institutions of social etiquette education for women only started becoming popular a few hundred years ago, the discourse around how a woman who receives a social etiquette education should operate has been annotated in popular culture much earlier than this.

Etiquette standards have been shaped largely by the wealthy as far back as 551 BCE. with the Chinese philosopher Confucius, whose customs are to show honor in the imperial courts. His seating arrangement around a table for banquets are still in practice today (Yang, 2016). A few of the first women on the scene of etiquette authorship in the United States were Emily Post and Amy Vanderbilt, whose writings appeared around the beginning to mid-1900s. Both women were white, upper-class European Americans. Having the fiscal and social resources to perpetuate their notions of etiquette, these authors were instrumental in shaping dominant discourses of etiquette when it came to greetings, dress, nonverbal courtesies, dining etiquette, and social event conduct. Etiquette standards and motivations for receiving an etiquette education are amplified to audiences in the films that will be analyzed.

Film and Social Reality

This study is predicated on the understanding that film and reality are not the same. Although the information on dominant discourse of women and social etiquette education in the section above deals with social reality, this study considers media content as representations of dominant ideologies. McQuail (2010) observes that the feminist perspective of film content is interested in “how texts ‘position’ the female subject in narratives and textual interactions and in doing so contribute to a definition of

femininity in collaboration with the ‘reader’” (p. 344). Some media scholars look at film to understand the message and impact it is having on the audience (e.g., Cacciatore et al. 2016; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Madere, 2017).

Communication studies researchers have studied film content over the years through various lenses and considered how content impacts their audiences. As Hylmö (2006) observes in her study on girls on film, “film represents meaning and myth as experienced by viewers who take the role of temporary observers in the world of the film” (p. 170). For this study, it is important to look at the phenomenon of how receiving social etiquette education is postured. We look at the dominant narratives of gender and race in the following inquiries:

RQ 1: How does social etiquette education promote normative gender ideologies in these films ?

RQ 2: How does social etiquette education promote racial ideologies in these films?

Method

When seeking to understand the power dynamic and break down dominant discourse, a feminist critical paradigm is an appropriate lens. This study seeks to map the phenomenon of protagonists in films receiving social etiquette training (thus acquiring the ticket to a higher social class or different social group). The ontological understanding of viewing films is predicated on the notion that film is not an accurate representation of reality. Feminist critical discourse analysis seeks to break down and expose dominant patriarchal discourse in order to disrupt it and bring opportunities to all gender identifications. Feminist critical discourse analysis has been utilized by researchers to understand how gender identities are developed within power dynamics (Lazar, 2014). The complex relationship between gender identity, race, and education will be explored through this epistemological lens in this analysis utilizing feminist critical discourse analysis, which seeks to better understand the underlying ideologies present in media representations.

It is useful to contemplate ontology, epistemology, axiology and voice before the research takes place. As Atkinson (2017) observes “feminist methodology is grounded in an ontological and epistemological vision focused primarily on patriarchal power structures and the lives of women (and minorities) who are marginalized and silenced by these power structures; the concept of standpoint theory helps to explain this grounding, as well as many of the overall goals of feminist research” (p. 66).

Feminist epistemology is observed throughout this work since the purpose is to shine a light on gender and race depictions in Hollywood romantic comedies. The axiology is found through understanding the message this is relaying and perpetuating to audiences. Critical discourse analysis is committed to understanding power advantages and inequities in society (Tracy & Muñoz, 2011). Major themes that emerge from critical discourse analysis considers how films produce or reproduce race and gender ideologies. These thematic categories centered around etiquette education in relation to clothing, food, and greetings will be discussed, as well as the overarching motivation for the character to achieve this education.

Results

First Film Analysis: Pretty Woman

The film *Pretty Woman* came out in 1990 and features a female protagonist (i.e., Vivian as played by Julia Roberts) who is a sex worker. The audience sees her participating in her social which is mainly her roommate and other co-workers. The group values are friendship, safety, and career ambition. A new client, Edward, invites her to stay in a luxury hotel and through a series of events, she is introduced to her client’s group of formal, upper-class business associates and finds herself in need of a social etiquette education to understand the code of this out-group. It is evident that Edward does not take into consideration that the social etiquette code of his upper-class business society is not the same code that Vivian is accustomed to. The hotel worker and department store workers educate Vivian on how to dress properly and what proper table manners look like in upper class society.

In the film, Vivian receives her social etiquette education from the hotel manager who has been working in the hospitality industry and knows the code of the upper social class. The scene below reflects their dialogue:

Barney: All right, Miss Vivian, one more time.

Vivian: – Dinner napkin. – Dinner napkin, laid gently in the lap.

Barney: Good. Elbows off the table. Don’t slouch.
Shrimp fork,
salad fork, dinner fork.

Vivian: I definitely have the salad fork
The rest of the silverware is a little confusing.

Barney: All right, if you get nervous, just count the tines.

Four tines: dinner fork.

And sometimes there are three tines in the salad fork. And sometimes— (Script-o-Rama, 2020).

At the dinner meeting, the first course that comes is pâté, and Vivian does not know what fork to use. It is explained that the salad is served at the end of the meal as a palate cleanser in traditional French cuisine fashion. Seeing Vivian's struggle, one of the businesspeople, Mr. Morris, says that he never understands what fork to use and picks up his pâté and toast with his hands. This is a non-verbal signal that Vivian can do the same and feel comfortable. Later in the meal, Edward instructs Vivian to try the escargo as it is a delicacy. One escargo shell accidentally slips from Vivian's snail tongs but is caught by a nearby server. These scenes reflect the ideology that women should know all of the different intricacies of how to approach different food that is only served at the fanciest of restaurants. Those who do not understand these nuances stick out for their lack of understanding, reinforcing class differences. Overall in the dining scene, Vivian tries her best to follow fine dining etiquette rules, and the men in the scene (including the server who catches an escargo shell as Vivian accidentally flings it into the air) attempt to make her feel comfortable while talking about more serious issues of business. Vivian desires acceptance into this world for her client, however, it might also be for her own desire of social mobility.

One of the most infamous scenes in this film happens around clothing. Vivian originally wears a blue and white mini skirt dress, knee-high black leather boots, and blonde wig. When walking into the Regent Beverly Wilshire hotel, Vivian receives stares from staff and patrons as this clothing insinuates her career as a sex worker. When Edward and Vivian were negotiating the contract of her staying as Edwards' companion, he articulates:

Edward: You'll need something to wear.

Vivian: Like what ?

Edward: Uh, nothing too flashy. Not too sexy. - Conservative. You understand ?

Vivian: Boring.

Edward: Elegant. Any questions ? (Script-o-Rama, 2020)

When Vivian goes shopping on Rodeo Drive, she is met with disapproval and asked to leave by the shopkeepers. Barney (the hotel manager) instructs Vivian to "dress a little more appropriately" (Script-o-Rama, 2020) if she is going to stay in the hotel. Vivian tells him of the problems she had shopping on Rodeo Drive and Barney connects her to a friend to find a cocktail dress that is appropriate for her first date to which Edward responds that she looks 'stunning'. She then must buy more clothes, and Edward helps her maneuver the elitist world of shopping on Rodeo Drive by telling shop keepers they are spending a lot of money.

This transformation that Vivian has, from wearing clothes that were seen as inappropriate to wearing clothes that are seen as elegant, reinforces the notion that clothing signifies gender norms of appropriate sexuality. As she learns to dress in a more acceptable manner, she sees herself as more than a sex worker. In the infamous scenes of shopping, the display of wealth speaks to the capitalist ideals of money leveraging power in society. The money allows for a sort of revenge for Vivian. The new clothes provided a way for normalization and a ticket into society. Completely ignored in the almost all White cast is the intersectionality of lack of access for racially marginalized groups. Where the film depicts class as a main obstacle, it does not make any mention of the White privilege the protagonists. Vivian seems to aesthetically "fit" into the upper-class circles as soon as she changes clothes.

Second Film Analysis: Hitch

The film *Hitch* provides an alternative perspective to social etiquette education as the protagonist is a Black male, Will Smith, who provides coaching to other men that want to develop long-term relationships with women. In the film, many greetings are specific to gender. For example, most of the clients Hitch meets are men who stand (or halfway rise) and shake hands while making direct eye-contact. One of the other protagonists and clients, Albert (played by Kevin James) is instructed that while on his first date with his love interest Allegra (played by Amber Valletta) to:

Hitch: Lean in, place your hand on the small of her back... and say it in her ear like a secret. Watch your hand placement. Too high says, "I just wanna be friends." Too low says, "I just wanna grab some ass." (Script-o-Rama, 2020)

Hitch also instructs Albert to shake hands "hard" with other men that are talking to her and to speak up. This is later seen playing

out with Allegra talking to other men. In the process, Hitch is teaching Albert how to navigate the differences between etiquette norms for same gender and mixed gender interactions. Hitch's instruction for men to adapt their communication style to be more forceful shows how men need to navigate these norms to be attractive to women.

Appropriate dress for women is a theme in the film. In one scene where Sara, played by Eva Mendes, is sitting in a bar, Hitch gives his analysis of her as sending the right signals that she is not interested by:

Hitch: no earrings, heels under two inches,
your hair is pulled back...
wearing reading glasses with no book,
drinking a Grey Goose martini...
which means you had a hell of a week
and a beer just wouldn't do it.
If that wasn't clear enough...
there's always the "fuck off"
that you have stamped on your forehead.
(Script-o-Rama, 2020)

The insinuation here is that women only dress to attract (or not attract) a male. However, one of Hitches' potential clients describes himself as:

Vance Munson: Power suit, power tie,
power steering. (Script-o-Rama, 2020).

Thus insinuating that male dress has everything to do with power and not necessarily attracting a partner. We can see from this scene that the coaching on the appropriateness of the touch is sending the message that with women a touch is either very strategic or non-existent with a greeting. When men are greeting men, it is always with a handshake. The coaching of a hypermasculine firm handshake with a loud voice of Hitch implies a perpetuated theme of women being attracted to traditional depictions of a binary, hypermasculine male gendered role.

Women are also assessed as what they wear sends a message about their level of sexual interest. This is a problematic message as it has been the rhetoric contributing to rape culture in poisoning a woman to be more responsible for an attack if she is wearing more sexual clothing (Becker & Boynton, 2020). This is especially a problematic message when considering Sara is played by a Black woman. Another problematic message was the overt nature of heteronormativity where it was expected that all male clients were seeking women. While the diverse representation in the cast of *Hitch* is important, the storyline of a Black man is in the service of white, patriarchal, heteronormative culture is the main theme that stands out.

Third Film Analysis: Crazy Rich Asians

The film *Crazy Rich Asians* was based on a book by Kevin Kwan and the first in his trilogy. This film was unique because although *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) featured an all-Asian American cast, *Crazy Rich Asians* was the first to have an all-Asian cast. This is important because Hollywood has a long history of casting White actors in the parts of Asian characters in a phenomenon known as yellowface (Phruksachart, 2017). This film took efforts in representing Asian and Asian American characters through anti-yellowface casting (Wong, 2020). As the protagonist, Rachel Chu (played by Constance Wu) is preparing to visit her boyfriend's (i.e., Nick Young played by Henry Golding) home city of Singapore, she is shopping with her mother, Kerry Chu (played by Tan Kheng Hua), and holds up a dress she thinks might be appropriate to meet Nick's family in:

Rachel: What do you think?

Kerry: No! No! No! No! You can't wear that to meet Nick's Ah Ma. Blue and white is for Chinese funerals. Now this, this symbolizes good fortune and fertility.

Kerry holds up a conservative RED dress.

Rachel: Great! I was really going for that 'lucky baby-maker' vibe.

Kerry: Hey! You are the one who asked for my help picking out a dress to meet Nick's family.

Rachel: It's only 'cause I hardly know anything about them. Every time I bring them up Nick changes the subject.

Kerry: Maybe he's embarrassed. Maybe his parents are poor, and he has to send them money. That's what all good Chinese children do.

Rachel chuckles and they keep searching for the right dress. (Bedard, 2021).

This interaction shows that etiquette education is important for making a first impression. Rachel asks her mother for a second opinion on what she should wear to meet her fiancé's family for the first time. It is evident that color of clothing holds different meanings and symbols, and as the desired outcome is to make a good first impression to future family, etiquette education is used here to empower the female protagonist in her desire for positive relational outcomes.

On arriving in Singapore, Rachel learns that her boyfriend's family has a lot of money and is in

the public eye. She learns to navigate what is expected dress code mostly through her friend, Peik Lin Goh (played by Awkwafina). There are many traditions that were outdated or not suitable for the socio-economic class expectancies of Nick's family. For example, the red dress her mother helped her pick out was not appropriate for meeting Nick's grandmother.

Although all of the characters show an interest in high fashion in Singapore, the one that stands out in particular is a male who has an eye for fashion. Young's cousin Oliver T'sien (played by Nico Santos) is a member of the LGBTQ+ community. The other characters who seem to be depicted as being particularly interested in fashion are all female characters. There is one scene where women go to an island for a bachelorette party and the first activity is a free shopping spree. After the "go" sign is given, the group of women run to the boutique and grab as many things as they can the following scene takes place:

It's chaos as women grab and fight over clothes. Francesca and Celine are in a tug-o-war over a caftan.

Francesca: Bitch, I saw this first!

Celine: But you have ping-pong tits!

Francesca: Oh, what about your mosquito bites?

Celine: No!

Francesca: You know it's true!

Celine: You're such a bitch!

Araminta: One more minute! You keep what you can carry. One more minute. You keep what you can carry.

With little time to spare, women FIGHT OVER outfits.

Rachel has a new dress she's just tried on. She watches the carnage, confused. Amanda clocks this.

Amanda: Yep, no one loves free stuff more than rich people.
re: dress
Just the one dress for you?

Rachel: I don't wanna lose an arm.
(Bedard, 2021).

This exchange reinforces the gender trope that women engage in catty fights that demean each other's bodies to get the best deal while

shopping (Kumar et al., 2022). This scene depicts women against women for the desired outcome of monetary possessions. It is positioned that this is what rich people do as they use their positions of privilege to fight over outfits. This scene with the group of women fighting over free clothing had as much to do with gender in perpetuating the ideal of the "cat fight" that pins females against females as it does with class and capitalism. The one male in the film who shows an expressed interest in fashion and is a part of the 'make-over' scene is a part of the LGBTQ+ community. This perpetuates the stereotype of all gay men being interested in fashion as he is one of the only characters in the film who discloses that he is part of the LGBTQ+ culture.

Greetings are also strongly emphasized throughout the film. Peik Lin hugs Rachel after not seeing her for a long time. Nick's friends (who are close to his age) hug Nick and Rachel. Although this is their first meeting with Rachel, the hug seems to be an extension of the way Nick was greeted as they are around the same age and wanting her to feel comfortable. This changes when Rachel meets Eleanor Young (played by Michelle Yeoh) who is Nick's mother:

Rachel: Oh, my gosh! I, I'm so happy to meet you, Mrs. Young.
gives her a big hug
Or, uh, Auntie. Right?
giggles
I'm learning the lingo.

Eleanor smiles, subtly scans Rachel, evaluating her.

Eleanor: I'm very glad to finally meet you, too. And I'm sorry Nick's father couldn't be here. He was called to business in Shanghai. (Bedard, 2021).

One can tell from the scene that Eleanor is very uncomfortable with the hug but does not make a scene. Gestures were an important depiction here as familiarity seems to be the main component of the nature of appropriateness of the greeting. When Nick's mother is horrified however when she receives a hug from Rachel whom she just met, it reinforces a class distinction and demonstrates the elitist ideals around social etiquette practices. This shows how etiquette can be used to keep out a group of people such as middle or poor socio-economic classes. Greetings are not given to staff (e.g., maids, butlers, etc.) by the Young family, however, greetings are given by the staff. This signals that people who give greetings (i.e., well intentioned, or not) are in a subordinate station. Genuine displays of affection seem to need to be stifled to maintain the air of being well bred.

Discussion

In the first film that was analyzed, *Pretty Woman*, the main character Edward played a mix between an authoritarian father figure that instructs Vivian, the sex worker, on matters of etiquette and a romantic interest. Barney, the hotel manager, also plays a part in instructing Vivian on how to dress and on dining etiquette. Vivian is expected to dress and act appropriately in social settings and then have sex when they are back home. This perpetuates a gendered ideal of women being only esthetically useful in public scenarios and then expected to have sex at the whim of the male counterpart. Edward also reiterates a fatherly tone throughout the film as he instructs Vivian not to fidget throughout the film or to chew gum when they are going shopping. This reinforces the message that women want to be dominated by their male counterparts.

The film *Hitch* reinforces the trope of Black people working toward helping the white male. The relationship between whiteness and desired success is positively correlated in that the audience is rooting for Hitch to give Albert the necessary etiquette tools to win over Allegra. Behind the scenes of this film, Andy Tennant, has directed predominantly White films such as *Sweet Home Alabama*, *Anna and the King*, and *Ever After: A Cinderella Story*. According to *Women and Hollywood* (2022), women only account for 34% of the characters who have speaking roles in Hollywood. This is important because when women do appear, they are portrayed in stereotypical ways. The majority of Hollywood films feature white characters and promote the ideology that whiteness is the dominant culture, without critiquing these portrayals. Humor operates in a way to reinforce these stereotypes: when characters stray try to achieve access to the dominant group, they often stumble in ways that the audience finds funny precisely because they are doing this against an ideal. Etiquette education is used as a tool in this film to stereotype women for the man to achieve the desired outcome of a romantic relationship targeted by the male. However, in the end, Hitch understands that this coached manipulation of women is wrong and breaks the fourth wall to tell the audience there are no basic principles when it comes to women.

In the final film, *Crazy Rich Asians* uses etiquette education to show the gap between socio-economic classes. The difference in greetings is a nonverbal way to divide the classes and prove one's superiority. Harmful tropes of women were reinforced in portions of the film such as when women were shopping and body shaming each other, however, this also emphasized the dangers of capitalism in changing motivations.

However, to what extent is this representation perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes? Rachel's mom, Kerry, teaches etiquette education in the form of color of dress to empower her daughter.

Limitations of Research

This research only looked at specific romantic comedies that were top grossing on charts. More nuances could be derived from these films as well as others that are newer or seen more frequently. It might be interesting in future research to use this research as a launching point to conduct focus groups to understand if these messages were coming across clearly to audiences. That is, are audiences picking up on the problematic messages and enjoying the film because of other reasons such as nostalgia?

Conclusion

Overall, this study revealed a problematic message that Hollywood films are sending to their target audience of women and young girls. All three films portrayed heteronormative romantic relationships. The narrative pathway of etiquette education with the goal of women fitting into the ideal romantic partner (i.e., an aesthetic, delicate actor) is problematic in that the goal in these messages portrays a potentially harmful understanding of female success. These messages also communicate that women who dress in a specific way are inviting or not inviting male advances. This is especially problematic in considering how society has positioned violence against women of color being at fault depending on their dress (Crenshaw, 2023; Naples, 2020). Media outlets have taken action to fight back against rape culture and challenge the discourse that the way a woman dresses makes her an easy target, absolving the perpetrator of responsibility (Salvatori & Mendes, 2023; Yurko et al., 2023). It is important that filmmakers and writers critically consider how the messages are calling women to use an etiquette education to enter the dominant group.

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